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AUTHOR Chandler, B. J.
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ABSTRACT

This discussion of the pros and cons of educational accountability and performance contracting comments on the educational and historical context of performance contracting and indicates some directions performance contracting will take. The author warns that since performance contracting is a new tool it must be used cautiously and with skill by experts. Abuses, misunderstandings, exaggerated claims, sloppy and undependable evaluating, and unethical practices, could result in disrepute for performance contracting, with a resulting repudiation by the American people. However, the author feels that with patient, unselfish, prudent, honest, and intelligent testing and experimentation, a highly effective tool for education may be developed and used. Related documents are EA 003 347, EA 003 358, EA 003 391, and EA 003 387. (JF)

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# WHAT SCHOOL BOARDS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT PERFORMANCE CONTRACTING

NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION
Regional Conference

B. J. Chandler, Dean
The School of Education, Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

Upon examining a copy of the program for this conference, a friend of mine remarked - you have the toughest assignment on the program. But I don't view it that way. Frankly, I don't think Dr. Webb and his associates who planned the program do either. Harold Webb knows I'm no expert on performance contracting, and so do I. He said that he wanted a neutral educator to listen, hopefully to think some, and to reflect back some of the basic ideas of the conference.

The reason my assignment is actually the least difficult of any on the program is simple. All the other speakers have had to present facts, adduce evidence, and indicate specifically what they were talking about. They had to deal with reality. They have been challenged on both factual grounds and interpretations of evidence. All I need is a crystal ball. Note my topic - "Where Will It All End?" No one knows where it will all end. Obviously, therefore, what I say in these wrap-up remarks is conjectural and one man's opinion. While some or all may disagree with some or all of what I say, it would be difficult to refute today my version of what the crystal ball indicates will happen tomorrow and the next day. So, I'm grateful to Harold Webb for this free-wheeling kind of assignment - the title for which I did not select incidentally, but for which I am grateful.

In these concluding remarks for what has been a fascinating and worth-

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while conference, for which we are all indebted to N.S.B.A. I shall attempt to do two things; namely,

1. To offer a few comments on the educational and historical context of performance contracting, and

2. To summarize the more cogent, salient, and persuasive ideas and contributions gleaned from the conference. Included in the summary, of course, will be some indication of where I think it will all end.

The sage who said there is nothing new under the sun was most certainly correct with regard to accountability and performance contracting. I submit that school boards have been accountable in the most basic way possible in our political system - at the polls at election time - throughout our history. School superintendents have been accountable through the contract renewal process. Unlike professors and teachers, superintendents (and deans) don't have tenure in their positions.

More than a hundred years before Texarkana and Dorsett Educational Systems entered into a performance contract, England embarked upon a pay according to results program. Test scores of elementary school pupils in reading, writing, and arithmetic determined the amount the teacher was paid. The "Payment by Results" program begun in 1863 lasted until 1897, some 24 years. A basic cause of its demise, according to one authoritative source, was that payments for examination scores resulted in "a game of mechanical contrivance in which teachers will and must more and more learn how to beat us." (Reports on Elementary Schools 1852-1882. Sir Francis Sanford, etc., MacMillan Company, 1889).

That performance contracting has been tried before and didn't work should not, in my judgment, be interpreted either as pro or as con. I'm simply trying to sketch a background for current developments.

I'm reminded of a remark attributed to President Nixon. He said: "The lamps of enlightenment are lit by the spark of controversy." If so, we can

expect many burning lamps in education sparked by the growing emphasis on accountability devices and approaches. Already confusion characterizes even our terminology. To me, accountability is a broad term which means that school authorities are responsible to the public for expenditure of funds and the results obtained. Manifestations of accountability include such specific approaches as performance contracting, voucher schemes, and merit pay for teachers. Performance contracting is simply a legal agreement between the board of education and a firm or group which stipulates payment of given amounts of money for educational achievement of pupils as set forth in the contract.

Two important generalizations stand out in my thinking in regard to recent and current accountability developments. In the words of a recent editorial in the Phi Delta Kappan magazine by Don Robinson: "The pressure is on teachers as well as administrators and board members to consider seriously ways of satisfying the public's legitimate demand for some system of accountailiby that will improve teacher performance where it needs to be improved."

That the pressure is on is indicated by a recent Gallup Poll. The first question was: "Would you favor or oppose a system that would hold teachers and administrators more accountable for the progress of students?" As would be expected, 67 per cent of those responding said they would favor. But what do they favor? In the abstract, everyone favors accountability. Some clue as to meaning of the first question in the Gallup Poll is indicated by the second: "Would you like to see the students in local schools be given national tests so that their educational achievements could be compared with students in other communities?" Yes - was the answer of 75 per cent of those who responded. So, boiled down, many people think of accountability as being met through providing test scores. How tragic!

The second generalization is that board members, administrators, and teachers must confront and hopefully guide or at least influence the direction and tempo of inevitable change. This is a big order, I realize. But the

status quo in education will not endure. The formidable opposition to change in the field of education is little short of fantastic or fanatical as some would say.

It seems to me that three points have been made thus far. (1) Accountability and one means for trying to achieve it, performance contracting, are both old and new in education, (2) Tremendous pressure is building up in this country for refined and effective approaches to accountability, and (3) any significant change in education faces stiff resistance.

Several people have referred to performance contracting as a new tool in education. Dr.Webb described the increased and ever-increasing demands upon school boards to provide education acceptable to all, and to the New N.S.B.A. What, then, should we ask ourselves as we consider use of this new tool in an effort to meet ever increasing demands. We should be mindful that a tool may be useful or it may be lethal. A scalpel, for instance, a tool,in the hands of a skilled and ethical surgeon can be a life-saving instrument. In the hands of a quack or a charlatan, it can be a death delivering instrument.

Perhaps it would seem that now I have established for myself a springboard for either advocating or opposing performance contracting. To keep the option open a little longer, I shall attempt to summarize some of the pros and cons.

Advocates of more systematic, objective, and specific accountability through performance contracting advance several cogent arguments for use of this tool. These include:

1, Performance contracting will lead to needed change and experimentation in the schools.

2. Emphasis on pupil achievement will force teachers to focus directly on results and targeted objectives. Hence, teachers will not drift through day after day and year after year of lackadaisical, routine performance in the classroom.

3. Present schooling is not getting the job done as evidenced by drop-out rates, inability of many pupils to read, write, and spell. Therefore, the argument goes, its time to try some alternatives.

4. Performance contracting can lead to more scientific and efficient management of school systems. Reference here is to management support groups, independent educational audits, systems analysis, and planning-programming-budgeting.

5. More intelligent and efficient resource allocation can be achieved through performance contracting. School districts will be encouraged to develop explicit goals and priorities and in turn will use scarce resources more wisely.

6. Performance contracting could help to solve problems growing out of minority group education. Mr.Blaschke referred to performance contracting as a means of bringing minority group children up to grade level and presumably thereby removing one obstacle to integrating the schools.

7. Performance contracting could enhance objectivity in evaluation and research in education. It has been noted by several speakers that few experiments in education result in failures. The implication is that school officials, for public relations purposes, must pronounce all experiments a success. At the same time, the well-known Hawthorne effect may be in evidence. Unusual results are often achieved through novelty and as a result of a change in attitude or self-concept on the part of participants in an experiment.

8. By increasing the skills, primarily in reading, learning in all subjects can be enhanced. A synergestic effect will be realized. As children improve their reading ability, they can be expected to learn more effectively in science, social studies, math, and so on.

Serious pitfalls in performance contracting trends that I have heard discussed include:

1. Performance contracting focuses on skills-centered academic achievement of pupils. Such a focus can be detrimental to other important educational goals - such as aesthetic development, creative thinking, sound value perceptions, and wholesome interpersonal relationships. Educators must accept some responsibility for educating the child as a person - not just those aspects which are measurable by tests. For what he reads as well as how well he reads.

2. Performance contracting too often means increasing test scores in given academic subjects. This can lead to terrible abuses, such as teaching to tests, and neglect of teaching children to reason, to seek solutions to problems, to imagine, and to create. At the present time, it is difficult to write a contract with the legal specificity involved that takes into account the many facets of learning we expect of our children and youth.

3. Performance contracting may erode local autonomy and encroach upon local control of schools - to the extent that it exists.

4. Some contract programs provide tangible rewards to pupils, such as candy, radios, and other prizes, or in harsher terms, bribes, for improved performance. Such extrinsic rewards, some say, are more appropriate for training animals than for educating children. Some fear that such conditioning will carry over into other aspects of childrens' lives and will lead to de-emphasis on the intrinsic rewards of learning.

5. Performance contracting emphasizes crass materialism. Industrial concerns are not entering the field for purely altruistic reasons - they have to show a profit to survive, as any business does.

6. A possible fallacy in performance contracting is that all learning can be measured accurately. Most educators agree that standardized tests are culturally biased. College admissions officers have become increasingly wary of C.E.E.B. scores as accurate predictors of academic success in college.

7. Performance contracting is an act of quiet desperation on the part of some boards of education. They turn to contractors as a last resort when

facing a seemingly unsolvable problem. Thereby, they may be accused by some of "coping out."

8. Carried to its ultimate conclusion, performance contracting, if it promises to bring all children up to national norms on achievement test scores, is ludicrous. There is simply no way to have 100 per cent of the school children in this country in the upper 50 per cent on test scores, or in the upper half of their graduating classes.

Where will it all end? I could suggest that it can go in either of two directions:

1. Through abuses, misunderstandings, exaggerated claims, sloppy and undependable evaluating, unethical practices, performance contracting could end in disrepute, discredited - and be repudiated by the American people. Unfortunately, such has been the fate of many promising new developments or tools in education, Think, for instance, what happened to progressive education spawned out of the philosophy of James and Dewey and others. As we all know, progressive education with all its great potential, came to be ugly words. Especially ugly words to those who knew only the distortions and malpractices with the label of progressive education. What has happened or is happening to programmed instruction? The production and sales of hardware outstripped the preparation and intelligent use of soft-ware. I think a student of the history of educational reforms and innovation would say there is a chance performance contracting will end on the scrap heap of discredited and discarded practices of what had once been promising new tools and innovations in education.

2. The second direction which will determine where it will all end is that of patient, unselfish, careful, prudent, honest and intelligent testing and experimentation. If this direction is followed by all of us, then a highly effective tool for education could be developed and used.

As an incurable optimist, I opt for the second direction. If the prognosis is to prove accurate, then safeguards must be provided. And intelligent,

open, unselfish decision making on a democratic basis must characterize our experimentation with performance contracting.

My personal conclusion is that board members and educators should experiment with performance contracting under carefully specified conditions. And I think for the most part they will. The basic condition I'd like to see specified is that performance contracting must take place within a sound research design, preferably involving outsiders or independent evaluators.

Unlike space explorers, medical practitioners, and other professionals, educators have not had research findings to undergird school improvement efforts. But the time has come when it is feasible to test new developments in the field of education. We need to develop a genuine partnership between school systems, school board associations, universities, state departments of education, as well as civic, business, and industrial organizations to study educational problems. I would insist that any research design for performance contracting include more than standardized achievement test scores. Included should be questions growing out of the arguments enumerated a few minutes ago against performance contracting. And the research would be hard nosed. Not testimonials, not fragmented and presumptive evidence, not propagandistic conclusions. Scientific investigators have no emotional commitment or vested interest in the outcome of their experiments.

I would also ask the basic question: Is the contract a sound one? How can you tell? To a large extent you have to rely on your school attorney and superintendent. And there are too few school attorneys who understand the legal language and law as well as the terminology, philosophy and values in the field of education. Before signing a contract it would be prudent to have the attorneys and perhaps the superintendent of schools explain the contents and provisions to representatives of the school system and the public at large. If the attorneys and administrators fully understand the contract, then

they should be able to explain it to teachers, parents, principals and others. It is well to remember that contracts make demands on the board of education as well as the contractor.

What motivation does the program depend upon for success? This raises a psychological and a philosophical or value question. Is primary reliance upon extrinsic rewards and punishments - compulsion? Is it based on intrinsic motivation? The joy or self-satisfaction a child can feel when he learns? Or is motivation to be some of both or in between, seduction, one might say.

One thing our more thoughtful college age youth today are faulting the older generation on is our values or motivation. They are saying our society has become too materialistic. We value too highly, they say, material things. To make more money, we pollute the evironment. To guarantee profits, we engage in price fixing. They point to the fact that our society has developed the scientific and technological know-how and capability to send astronauts to the moon. But we can't move people into and out of our great cities. Our society is plagued with interracial strife, bitter community controversies, drug abuse, and the ravages, both spiritually and physically, of poverty. Of course, to some extent at least these are caricatures. But we need to think about such criticisms in relation to the use of performance contracting with its built-in system of rewards and punishments for children.

What I'm suggesting is that we look behind, and under, and over the cold print of the contract - and the cold print-out of the computer of test scores - and ascertain what will be learned by the child, in addition to subject matter provided for in the contract. McCluhan's words, the medium is the message, are applicable to performance contracting. Satisfy yourself that the motivation of the pupils is of a type that is humane and effective - that you would personally be pleased to participate in an endeavor that utilizes motivational techniques either implied or specified in the proposed contract.

Where will it all end? Some clue was provided by the poet Eliot:

Between the idea and the reality

Between the notion and the act

Falls the shadow

Apply those poetic words. The idea is performance contracting. The reality is the school system for which you are responsible. It is my guess that the idea of performance contracting will make substantial impact on the reality of school systems. And that it will end by the reality of the school system absorbing the idea bit by bit, unevenly, slowly, but surely the better features - better in a pragmatic sense - of performance contracting. And the shadow will be removed by intelligent, dedicated, prudent board members and educators with an insatiable quest for improved schools. And I end on that optimistic note.

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